

Politics of Elemental and Eliminative Representation of Women in the Indian Cinema

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Abstract: *Modernization in India came with its own set of issues which raised more questions than answers. It has been observed since ages that no matter how much progressive and modern we claim to be; we are still very much a part of the society where a variety of atrocities and violence against women like killing and aborting the girl child, honour killing, acid attacks, rape, etc. have almost become part of the everyday life. This brutally enigmatic reality of life has always managed to find means of representation and misrepresentation across different mediums. The Indian Hindi Cinema or Bollywood has produced a number of very significant movies where the atrocities and violence against women are depicted. Movies like – Mother India, Mirch Masala, Mrityudanda, Shakti: The Power, Provoked, etc. are some of the very important and impressively directed movies which in some way or the other reveal the darker side of society where women are subjected to torture and subjugation. Women in Bollywood are no longer “decorative objects” but through their realistic and powerful characterization aim to provide a “worldwide awareness of female experience...”. Movies like Bazaar, Provoked, Water and Fire have raised the issues of proper (ideal?) representation of women. This paper attempts to trace the instances of rebellion by such oppressed and abused women. This rebellion was not just at the level of raising their voice against injustice of society but it also penetrated the deep layers of systemic sectarian violence. It then becomes mandatory to look into the acts of violence and counter violence inside and outside the institution of marriage too as the institution of marriage holds the center in discourse of the Indian society. It attempts to look into the acts of articulation, dialogue, sexual aggressiveness and physical torture through a “culture – specific” and “situation specific” mode of analysis. It tries to find the intersections between the “real” and “reel” (mis) representations of women who are trying to make a conscious effort to address the anxieties and angsts of sexuality, gender, caste, class and ethnicity. The paper also tries to read the very phenomenon of modernization as a cultural discourse in the mainstream commercial Bollywood movies as well as in the critically acclaimed art movies.*

Keywords: Atrocities, Bollywood, class, power, subjugation, torture, rebellion, relationship (s), objectification

India and modernization! A lot has been said and claimed to put India into the category of modern nations, but these claims have always been questioned by certain socio-political situations and issues. The issue of violence and other atrocities against women in India stands demanding attention and action since medieval ages. The issues pertaining to violence against women and their lamentable condition in the society were in need of some kind of representation where they could reach to the masses and could generate some sense of awareness. These concerns are not new to the society or to the cinema. These are the stories of the struggles of women who tried to confront a suppressive social structure and their individual intertwined desires.

The Indian Hindi Cinema or Bollywood is a global phenomenon with over 1.2 billion viewers. It has fashioned and articulated the fluctuating structure of modern India. It has also earned itself a bad reputation for objectifying women. In majority of the mainstream cinema women have been portrayed as decorative things. There's another side of the cinema which has depicted them as martyrs or victimizers of other women. There are a few movie makers who have produced a number of very significant movies where the actual atrocities and violence against women is depicted. They tried to make a more “gender sensitized cinema” where the “exploited” and “exploitable roles” are clearly illustrated. These movies in a way made their own political statement where a woman is raising her voice against the injustice in the society. Movies like – *Mother India, Mirch Masala, Mrityudanda, Shakti: The Power, Provoked, Pinjar, Lajja, Water, Earth, Fire, Parched*, etc.

are some of the very important and impressively directed movies which, some way or the other, reveal the darker side of the society where women are subjected to torture and subjugation. Now women in Bollywood are no longer the “decorative objects” but through their realistic and powerful characterization, aim to provide a “world - wide awareness of female experience...” Movies like – *Bazaar, Provoked, Water and Fire* has raised the issues of the proper (ideal?) representation of women. These movies very successfully questioned the larger authoritarian male world order where women are subjugated, tortured, raped and murdered. They visualized “the many layers of a brutal world for women”. These movies in a way also questioned the stereotypical objectification of a woman's body in the Bollywood which was mostly meant for the male gaze. More than that it questioned the commodification of the female body meant for the male consumption in and outside the marital relationship. It tries to look into the issues of different cinematic experiences and instances where the women have been denied their actual identity and have been either intentionally eliminated and/or kept in the margins. The above mentioned movies make a deliberate attempt to present a very problematic and partial picture of women in the society to create a need for awareness on the issues of the social situation of the women. At this juncture it becomes crucial to understand that the movies related to the issues of women are majorly controlled by the prevailing sociopolitical discourses on women and eventually become victims of the very much open or liberal epistemology of conventional feminism which has always looked upon the issues of women as a kind of war of the genders. So there's a need to recognize and scrutinize the representation of

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women in artistic practice which should be able to contend the fundamentally social appeal of all practices.

There have been some efforts in the direction of the social upliftment of women since 1800. It became more organized around 1900 – 1920 with the formation of the organizations like **The Women's Indian Association (WIA, 1917)**, **The National Council of Indian Women (NCWI, 1925)**, and **The All India Women's Conference (AIWC, 1927)**. Some very remarkable women like Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Sarojini Naidu, Margaret Cousins, etc., were the chiefs' of such organizations. In their leadership and with the help of some prominent nationalist leaders many legislative acts were passed and proposed like the Sharda Act (1929) restraining the child marriage, Hindu women's rights to property act (1937), the Muslim personal law application act (1937), etc. With the help of such organizations Women's Movement in India was catching pace and tried to bring women in the center from the margins through a number of exemplifications in a variety of mediums like that of art and academia. Sangeeta Datta says in her *Globalisation and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema* that the academic debate of the female representation should move on from the abstract analyses to a more dynamic commitment like the "modalities of image, forms of speech and address to viewers" (Datta, 71). In light of the Women's Movement in India and its repercussions on cinema she further illustrates-

The nationalist rhetoric of the pre - independence years produced films valorizing the mother figure. Mehboob Khan's *Aurat*, a modest film made in the early forties was remade in color as *Mother India* in 1956. The making of a new nation, the projection of Indian culture to the world market, the first International Film Festival in Delhi – perhaps all these factors led to the tremendous reception of the film both at home and abroad. It was the immediate post - independence moment that led to the phenomenal iconisation and identification of the mother and nation in popular consciousness. Nationalist discourse constitutes the female body as a privileged signifier and various struggles are waged over the meaning and ownership of that body. What does it mean for women to be explicitly evoked in theories of nation only when their specificity can serve a particular cause? As the women's movement gained strength in India and highlighted women's oppression and a struggle for an egalitarian society– a series of women film makers brought women from the margins to the center of their texts. An alternative viewpoint and a female gaze brought focus on female subjectivity. A number of films were made by Aparna Sen, Sai Paranjape, Vijaya Mehta, Aruna Raje and Kalpana Lajmi, which were sensitive portrayals of women protagonists, in search of social and sexual identity, women firmly located in specific socio - historical contexts. (Datta, 72 - 74)

Movies like *Bazaar*, *Mandi*, *Nikaah*, *Water* and *Provoked* have socio - economic backdrops which stand at the intersections of the history, real life and reel life. In these movies we do find an articulation of ideas and opinions; wherein we see that somewhere the modern feminism is in correlation with the traditional values. When we see characters like Najma, Rukminibai, Nilofer, kalyani and

Kiranjeet challenging the larger social structure and their personal tangled desires and needs, we notice a cognizance of the female experience. These and many other such movies visualize a multi layered vicious world for women. These are the stories of the exploited and exploitable roles in both – real and reel life; which tries to contest the unfair and uneven situations that instigate violence against women.

The story of *Nikaah* has a Muslim locale. It criticized the use and abuse of woman by her two successive husbands. When I say 'use' and 'abuse' I mean the representation of woman as a 'thing' meant for the consumption of the male. Her condition after her first divorce is still the very condition of the majority of women in India who are looked down as a social stigma and have a hard time settling in the routine life and even finding a decent job without being the subject of scorn and ridicule. There is another point of view which this movie presents before us – the place of divorced/single woman in the society. Through the repeated Nikah (marriage) of Niloufer it is signified that there is no place for a single woman in the Indian society. She needs to have a male protection; preferably a husband's, in order to gain respectable social recognition. The way Niloufer is treated in this movie is very disturbing. She actually becomes a victim of male – her two respective husband's whimsies and insecurities and is tossed around like a damaged and soiled toy! This persecution of the woman within the so called sacred bond of marriage; demonstrating a kind of unseen and obscure violence, is very much intimidating, shocking and precarious.

The notion of woman as an object of consumption and commodification is expressed in a very disturbingly striking manner in the movies like - *Bazaar*, *Mandi* and *Water*. The issues of girl - child marriage, wife shopping and buying, forced prostitution, molestation, widow sexual exploitation, etc. have been bought up in a certain manner which asserts that a female body can be transactional! It can be hustled up and traded for family honour, financial benefit, marriage, sex, flimsy egos and respect. They all portray a sort of perverted politics of majoritarian upper class domination. In *Bazaar* and *Nikaah*; religion plays an important role as the bartering, the trade happens in the guise of religiosity and tradition. In *Bazaar*, throughout the movie we notice that women and money are talked about together. The protagonist of the movie – Najma, belongs to a withered high class family of Hyderabad Nawabs. Her mother tries to force her into prostitution so that they can live a 'respectable' and reasonably lavish life matching their social position. When Najma refuses to do so her mother tries to comfort and then confront her by saying that she just needs to do it in the darkness of night so that no one knows about it and asks her to do so in the name of family's honour, while her brothers are free to roam around without doing anything; because their doing any kind of job will ruin their 'Nawabi thath'. There is a beautiful scene in the very beginning of the movie where Najma is watching herself in the mirror inquisitively and we as audience watch her watching in the mirror. It does provides a kind of visual pleasure to the audience in terms of the scene's cinematography but in a way it also gives a sense of premonition that throughout the movie Najma keeps on questioning her existence, her identity and her actions. The movie questions the despair of

the poor and exposes the decadent Indian society where the poor teenage brides are sold and bought by the old and rich. Najma painfully says that – “aapke bazaar mey agar koi sabse sasti chiz hay – to who hay – aurat” (the cheapest object in your market is – the woman). With such serious and tragic storyline, we notice a very casual atmosphere maintained by most of the male actors throughout the movie. There are very serious matters of love, life and livelihood and it's the poor and helpless people from the society who are affected majorly by these issues. The rich and powerful simply play ignorant and indifferent to the poor people's pleadings. The other female characters in the movie are also silent because they know that teenager Shabnam's marriage to wealthy middle aged Shakir Ali Khan will somewhere clear the way to their own marriage (s) and better future. The tradition of “Meher” in Muslim marriage which makes the bride a property of the groom is confronted in this movie. It makes marriage a legal system of buying and selling humans. It is very unsettling to notice that so far no hardcore social or political hardcore efforts have been made to abolish this practice.

“Mard kharidta hai tabhi toh aurat bikti hai!” (Just because a man buys, a woman is sold.) Movie *Mandi* depicts an even murkier side of the society where the aged old “kalakar” – the artists are forced to reduce themselves into prostitution as their art is no longer appreciated or recognized by the society. In the movie Rukminibai – a brothel madam, keeps on lamenting about their downfall. There is a very interesting character of the photographer in the movie who keeps on clicking pictures of the prostitutes from all the angles and if possible in ‘all’ kind of positions and for that he is ready to do almost anything – just like modern paparazzi! In a way this character shows that reality of the society which is full of people who delights in hidden sensual pleasures like looking at the sexy and sensational pictures of women and also wants to earn by selling these pictures to the ‘demanding’ customers. There is also a policeman in the brothel who actually lives in the brothel and has also fathered a child with one of the prostitutes. Instead of taking the responsibility of the child and his mother and taking them home, he rather stays back in the brothel in order to fulfill his sexual desires from almost all the prostitutes! He is actually free from all the responsibilities of being a father or a responsible husband or partner! His 24*7 presence there also in a way depicts a society which has crossed all the limits of decency, responsibility and which has no concern for the needy and the poor. It is society of lecherous and treacherous upper class rich people where the poor people and prostitutes like Rukminibai are forced to safeguard their ‘illegitimate secrets’. There is a triple displacement of prostitutes in the movie. They made to relocate again and again because the so called respected and sophisticated people refused to live around them and demanded more and more space for the modernization of their surroundings. The prostitutes were made to live in a dilapidated building near a shrine and they turned it into a thriving business and religious center, where all the “wishes” of people are answered. These displacements also changed the power dynamics inside and outside the brothel. Many well – guarded secrets are revealed and Zeenat, the most valued prostitute runs away with her own step brother in desperation. Rukminibai is

kicked out of her own ‘kingdom’ but manages to find a beautiful place with a Shivlinga at the riverbank and poor deaf and dumb Phoolmani running towards her from the assumed Nari Niketan Grih. This scene is very symbolic as Rukminibai finds again a place to start her new life with signs of life - water (river), religion (Shivlinga) and woman and man (Phoolmani and Tungrus) and for Phoolmani it's a run from one prison to the other. Throughout the movie the discussion moves around some ‘Nari Niketan Grih’, but it is never actually shown! This could also be interpreted as the larger reality of society where the places or spaces like these which work for the betterment of needy and suffering women do not exist. Their existence is just on paper. Even if they exist, the condition of women in such places is very horrifying. There is a very interesting representation of female characters in this movie which depicts most of them as “in the service of the society”! It includes the prostitutes and the social worker. Another interesting point is that – the people of all caste and creed are welcomed in the brothel. It comes out as a more secular place than the actual educated and so called progressive society. This movie has also very successfully depicted women of almost all the types – innocent women, shrewd women, lusty women, longing women, always pregnant women, smart women, foolish women, constantly worried and working women, pretentious, mysterious and confused women etc.

Bazaar and *Mandi* also attempts to probe into the issues of the identity formation and its deconstruction. Even the titles of both the movies are very apt! *Bazaar* – meaning a proper market with established and trained shopkeepers like Hajjun Bi who serve to the chosen elites or the highest bidder; unfolds the inhuman and pretentious side of the high class society whereas *Mandi* – which means a road side, street market with small vendors shows its availability and access to all. It also shows the hypocritical nature and the vileness of the high class people who are full of contempt for the poor and live dual lives of respectability and debauchery.

These movies, no doubt elementarily talk about the injustices and atrocities on women; have a very eliminative approach of doing so. They depict women in the margins, mostly sidelined. The representation of women in Bollywood is crucial in the mode and manner of their depiction which majorly revolves around them as ‘something’ which could be traded, bartered or replaced.

In contrast to these movies; *Utsav* by Girish Karnad presented a very interesting viewpoint on the lives and condition of women. Though the story is set in the medieval India; it is way modern in terms of its concept. This movie talks about a brothel and a prostitute named Vasantsena in it. This movie offers a very different perspective on the lives of prostitutes as they had a distinct position in the society and were respected. They were under the state's protection. It is not just a story of prostitutes experimenting with sex and helping Vatsayana with his magnum opus – *Kama Sutra*; but a narrative of the power politics - the Marxian concept of entertainment, consumption and sex related to the politics. Yet when it comes to the representation of women, it falls into the stereotype and depicts them as objects of and for entertainment and luxury – meant for the male consumption. As Charudutta's wife Aditi clarifies to Vasantsena that in a

way she is happy that her husband is having an affair with the most sought after prostitute in the state, but at the same time she makes it very clear to her that ultimately she is his wife and therefore holds a better position in the society. The idea of female representation here becomes a bit problematic as on one side the prostitutes are shown as well respected beings in the society but at the same time their representation and existence is mainly for the male gaze and consumption. They are both – elemental to the society but are also in the easily eliminative zone of the society.

There's a need to not only venture into the avenues of the politics of (mis) representation of women in the Indian cinema; but also to bring into fore the trials and traumas of the Indian woman who struggles to find, claim and reclaim her identity as a living – breathing person! The notion of inflicting violence upon women becomes very important here as this violence is multi layered and multi - dimensional. This violence is not just the physical violence; it is also a sexual, emotional and psychological trauma for the woman who is victimized for the centuries which is the result of a number of superstitions and malpractices prevalent in the society at the levels of religion, caste, class and gender. In Deepa Mehta's *Water* there's a very disturbing portrayal of the pre - independence Hindu widows. Where they are denied all the pleasures of life and made to forsake their dignity with no right or hope for their emancipation. Widows like Kalyani and Shakuntala either live a life with no dignity and forced servitude or they just die or commit suicide. These were their only options. Theirs were the silent and silenced narratives. The representation of such narratives can be studied as an attempt to understand and investigate the lives of the pre - independence Hindu widows and the post - independence Hindu widows. With this it needs to be determined whether the society has actually changed?

In Indian society, a woman's strength and virtue is directly proportional to how much suffering they can endure and still do what is expected of them. This paper also attempts to trace the instances of rebellion by such oppressed and abused women. This rebellion was not just at the level of raising their voice against the injustice of the society, but it also penetrated the deep layers of systematic sectarian violence. Movies like *Provoked* are made to address the issues relating to the violence upon women. In spite of suffering severe domestic violence Kiranjit is made to suffer in the prison for long. A battered and provoked victim Kiranjit eventually manages to settle down in her life. In the movie *Provoked* we see a very problematic representation of Indian women. She suffers the violence and reacts violently by killing her husband, but in prison, offers formal prayers with the help of a proper Hindu pandit (priest). One of the reviews about the movie states that - "The construction of the self - conscious Indian images and narratives, a sense of 'Indianness', not only for the Indian audience but for the European market with a touch of glamour." Other reviewer opined – "Phenomenal iconisation and identification of the mother, the wife and nation in popular consciousness." The violence begins at the domestic level and then penetrates deep and silenced in the name of duty, religion and society. Religion demands obedience and silence. This violence is deeply rooted and somewhere also knowingly –

unknowingly inculcated in the future generations. It then becomes mandatory to look into the acts of violence and counter violence in and outside the institution of marriage too as the institution of marriage holds the center in the discourse of the Indian society. The present, now, is the time to look into the acts of articulation, dialogue, sexual aggressiveness and physical torture on women through a "culture specific" and "situation specific" mode of analysis. It tries to find the intersections between the "real" and "reel" (mis) representations of women who are trying to make a conscious effort to address the anxieties and angsts of sexuality, gender, caste, class, and ethnicity because even today they are not able to find strength to tell anyone about their pain – because they don't know if anyone would listen!

From *Mother India* in 1956 to *Parched* in 2016, in the last 60 years of Indian Hindi cinema how little the technique of representation of women has actually changed! These movies raise very important questions not only of the proper representation (s), but also of the situations and circumstances in which such representations are carried out. They are majorly pertaining to some or the other type of violence. Is there any way escaping this violence or we simply need enduring it? Precious Arinze says in *The Women Who Carried Violence In Their Bodies* –

The idea of a female voice that is seen and heard is an inconceivable atrocity to some. The need to censor and police the female body is built on fear. But fear of what? A culture that rids the male body of responsibility and accountability while tattooing blame on the female body is dangerous and benefits no one.

Women are culturally engineered to be custodians of patriarchy as much as men are. The existence of these wonderful, rebellious, independent, audacious women characters opened my eyes to painful realities. I drew inspiration from their experiences, some of which had been mine. Like them, I did what I could to move against the swirl of transgression. (Arinze)

These myriad representations of women in Bollywood in a way attempts to make its own political statement (s). From show pieces to victims and martyrs, they are now emerging as survivors with possibilities of empowerment, emancipation and freedom.

"I am reclaiming my time. I am learning what freedom is. Coming into myself with the audacity of sunshine after a storm. I am verbalizing my defiance."

- Precious Arinze

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Movies: -

Aurat

Director: MehboobKhan

Released in: 1940

Mother India

Director: Mehboob Khan

Released in: 1956/57

Nikah

Director: B. R. Chopra

Released in: 1982

Bazaar

Director: Sagar Sarhadi

Released in: 1982

Mandi

Director: Shyam Benegal

Released in: 1983

Utsav

Director: Girish Karnad

Released in: 1984

Water

Director: Dipa Mehta

Released in: 2005

Provoked

Director: Jag Mundra

Released in: 2006/2007

Parched

Director: Leena Yadav

Released in: 2015/2016